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ABSTRACT

The "teaching of values" should be relabeled as an effort to help form the character of young people and to aid them in achieving moral literacy. There is a general consensus regarding helping children develop reliable standards of right and wrong to guide them through life. In order that children develop appropriate character traits, it is important they be able to identify both the form and content of these traits. Teachers and principals should be willing to articulate ideals and convictions to students, and to state not only the difference between right and wrong, but also make an effort to live that difference as role models for students. A wide choice of materials is available for infusion throughout the K-12 curriculum. (KWL)

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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My topic today is the teaching of values in our schools. This is an issue that has been getting much attention in the last few months. I am glad of that. During my tenure as Secretary of Education, and for years before, as a philosophy teacher and a visitor to the schools, I have been trying to encourage such discussion.

I must say, though, that I have never particularly liked the word "values," in this discussion. The term "values" tends to suggest that judgments of right and wrong, noble and base, just and unjust, are mere personal preferences, that things are worthwhile only if and insofar as individuals happen to "value" them. As a friend once said, when he hears the word "values," he reaches for his Sears catalogue.

Rather than reach for a catalogue, let me today reach for a new term, or terms. Because these issues are not matters of mere personal taste, let me propose that we reconsider the enterprise now known as "the teaching of values." Let me argue that we relabel our enterprise the effort to help form the character of the young and to aid them in achieving moral literacy. The formation of character and the achievement of moral literacy -- that, I think, is what we really should be about.

As Secretary of Education, I've campaigned quite a bit for a reaffirmation of the central importance of the task of the formation of character in the young. Eighteen months ago, in my first major

address, I spoke of "character" as one of the "Three C's" of education, alongside "content" and "choice." I said then that forming character must begin in the home, starting in the earliest childhood years, but that afterwards schools must help -- because as President Eliot of Harvard once reminded us, in the campaign for character no auxiliaries are to be refused. And the school can be a mighty auxiliary.

What is character? Webster defines character as "strength of mind, individuality, independence, moral quality." We would of course include more. In defining good character, we should include specific traits such as thoughtfulness, fidelity, kindness, diligence, honesty, fairness, self-discipline, respect for law, and taking one's guidance by accepted and tested standards of right and wrong rather than by, for example, one's personal preferences.

Now, it seems to me that there is a good deal of consensus among the American people about these character traits. That is, there is fairly general agreement as to what elements constitute good character in an individual. You won't find many people who are going to argue: "No, honesty is not a part of good character," or "No, courage isn't really admirable." We all agree on the value of these things. Now we may disagree on cases involving these traits, or when there are conflicts among competing claims, but we do still maintain our allegiance to good character as a virtue, as something <u>worth</u> preferring.

Not only is there a consensus among the American people on the elements that constitute good character, most Americans want

their schools to help form the character of their children. According to a recent Gallup Poll, Americans in overwhelming numbers say they want schools to do two things: first, teach our children to read, speak, think, write, and count correctly; and second, help our children develop reliable standards of right and wrong to guide them through life. In this, Americans today echo the sentiments of Thomas Jefferson two hundred years ago. Listing the basic requirements for a sound education, Jefferson spoke of writing, calculation, and geography -- and also of the important task of what he termed the improvement of one's "morals and faculties."

But despite the beliefs of the majority of Americans, no sooner does anyone begin to point out how important it is to "teach values" in the schools, than others immediately begin to raise the specter of awful complexity. As soon as someone starts talking about forming character at school, others claim that it just can't be done, that we won't find a consensus on what to teach or how to teach it. I have heard this complaint on and off, mostly on, in the fifteen years I've been writing on this issue.

Two weeks ago, for example, a New York Times columnist wrote that if the people urging schools to teach values -- including, he wrote, Governor Cuomo and myself -- were asked to define those values, we'd probably find it hard to agree. And last month a Washington Post columnist, also writing about the Secretary of Education and the Governor of New York, gave us this analysis: "In the United States, the most heterogeneous nation in the world, one man's values can be another man's anathema. ... Does it really make

any sense to add still further to [our schools'] burden, to insist that they provide answers to questions of values upon which we mature adults cannot agree?"

And sometimes it is one and the same person who calls attention to the importance of teaching values, and then immediately reconsiders, thinks better of his suggestion and becomes less sure. So Governor Cuomo, in talking about his plans to bolster the teaching of values in New York schools, was reported as immediately cautioning, "You probably won't be able to get a consensus view on values, so it probably won't go anywhere, but we'll try."

Governor Cuomo is right to stress the importance of teaching values -- but he shouldn't be so doubtful that it can be done. I agree with caution. I agree with care. I agree there are hard cases. I agree there is not a consensus on everything. But nevertheless this task can be done, and should be done. It has been done for most of American history. While a certain amount of caution and prudence is of course healthy -- no one wants to impose a moral straight jacket on children -- we do not want to invite them to a moral vacuum either. There is no reason for excessive timidity, and the kind of virtually paralyzing caution that responds to any reminder of the importance of schools' role in the formation of character. If there is an increasingly broad consensus today as to the importance of this task -- as there is -- my message today is that it can be done, and that we should de-mystify this subject so we can get down to business.

The first mistake is to say that we cannot agree on

"values." Well, we cannot agree on everything. There are hard cases. But we can agree on the basic traits of character we want our children to have, and that we want our schools to develop. We can expect our schools both to help acquaint our children with certain character traits, and to develop them. And we can agree that there ought to be such a thing as moral literacy.

What do I mean by "moral literacy"? As Professor E. D. Hirsch of the University of Virginia has pointed out, being literate entails more than recognizing the forms and sounds of words. It is also a matter of building up a body of knowledge enabling us to make sense of the facts, names and allusions cited by an author. This background knowledge Hirsch calls cultural literacy. For example, someone who is unsure who Grant and Lee were may have a hard time understanding a paragraph about the Civil War, no matter how well he reads. Likewise, a reader who isn't familiar with the Bill of Rights will not fully understand a sentence containing the words "First Amendment." Understanding a subject, then, involves not just the possession of skills; it also depends on the amount of relevant prior knowledge a reader has, on his cultural literacy.

So it is with "moral literacy." If we want our children to possess the traits of character we most admire, we need to teach them what those traits are. They must learn to identify the forms and content of those traits. They must achieve at least a minimal level of moral literacy that will enable them to make sense of what they will see in life and, we may hope, that will help them live it well.

So the question is: How does education form character and help students achieve moral literacy?

It seems that some have forgotten the answer. In recent years, although we have not over-intellectualized the school curriculum, ironically some have tried to over-intellectualize moral development. Some educationists have turned to a whole range of mostly dubious "values education" theories and practices, wherein the goal is to guide children in developing "their own values" by discussion, dialogue, and simulation. In some places, educators have acted as though they should be neutral toward questions of right and wrong. I believe these views are mistaken.

For example, late last year the New York Times ran an article quoting New York area educators proclaiming that "they deliberately avoid trying to tell students what is ethically right and wrong." The article told of one counseling session involving 15 high school juniors and seniors.

In the course of that session the students concluded that a fellow student had been foolish to return $1,000 she found in a purse at the school. According to the article, when the students asked the counselor's opinion, "He told them he believed the girl had done the right thing, but that, of course, he would not try to force his values on them. 'If I come from the position of what is right and what is wrong,' he explained, 'then I'm not their counselor.'"

Now once upon a time, a counselor offered counsel, and he knew that an adult does not form character in the young by taking a

stance of neutrality toward questions of right and wrong or by merely offering "choices" or "options." Aristotle knew, for example, that it is habit which develops good character, habit shaped by both precept and example. "It makes no small difference," Aristotle wrote, "whether we form habits of one kind or another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference." Contemporary psychology tends to support this view strongly.

It is now the case, as it has always been the case, that it is by exposing our children to good character and inviting its imitation that we will help them develop good character for themselves. This means our schools must have what the ancient Greeks would have called an "ethos" -- that is, our schools themselves must have good character. And for the purposes of our discussion today, such an ethos depends on two crucial conditions.

First, teachers and principals must be willing to articulate ideals and convictions to students. As Oxford's Mary Warnock has written, "you cannot teach morality without being committed to morality yourself; and you cannot be committed to morality without holding that some things are right and others wrong."

This statement is so obvious that it is hard to believe we have overlooked it in some places, even rejected it in others. Perhaps we would do well to remember that the Greek word "character" means enduring marks, marks that can be formed in a person by an almost infinite number of influences. But as the theologian Martin Buber pointed out, the teacher is different from other influences in

one important way, and it is definitely not in his neutrality. As Buber wrote, "the educator is distinct from [all other influences] by his will to take part in the stamping of character and by his consciousness that he represents in the eyes of the growing person a certain selection of what is, a selection of what is 'right,' of what should be." It is in this will, Buber says, in this clear standing for something, that the "vocation as an educator finds its fundamental expression."

Now, I am not talking about browbeating students into accepting points of view. That is simply hard indoctrination, which we all deplore. Nor am I talking about moralism. I am talking about ethical candor. To put students in the presence of a morally mature adult who speaks honestly and candidly to them is not to violate their rights. On the contrary, it is essential to students' moral growth. And it seems to me that this is why many teachers entered the profession in the first place -- because they thought they could make a positive difference in the lives of students, in the development of their character, to make them better as men and women, as well as to help develop their skills.

The second condition for a proper ethos in the school is this: We must have teachers and principals who not only state the difference between right and wrong, but who make an effort to live that difference in front of students. In this business of character, there has never been anything as important as the quiet power of moral example.

Recently I visited a class at Waterbury Elementary School in

Waterbury, Vermont. I asked the students, "Is this a good school?" They answered, "Yes, this is a good school." I asked them, "Why is this a good school?" Among other things, these eight-year-olds said, "The principal, Mr. Riegel, makes good rules and everyone obeys them." So I said, "Give me an example." And they answered, "You can't climb on the pipes in the bathroom. We don't climb on the pipes and the principal doesn't either."

Now I recognize that this example is probably too simple to please a lot of people who want to make this topic difficult, but there is something profound in the answer of those children, something educators should pay more attention to. You can't expect children to take messages about rules or morality seriously unless they see adults taking those messages seriously in their day-to-day affairs. Certain things must be said and certain examples must be set -- there is no other way. These are the first and most powerful steps in nurturing character and developing moral literacy in the young.

In addition, when it comes to character and moral literacy in school, there is of course the question of curriculum. What materials, texts, and books should schools ask students to read? The research shows that most so-called "values education" exercises and separate courses in "moral reasoning" tend not to affect children's behavior; if anything, they may tend to leave children morally adrift. So what kind of materials should we be using instead?

The simple answer is: We don't have to reinvent the wheel.

And we don't have to add new courses. We have a wealth of material to draw on -- material that virtually all schools once taught to students for the sake of shaping character. And this is material that we can teach in our regular courses, in our English and history courses.

Let me return here to the idea of moral literacy. As I said earlier, the vast majority of Americans share a respect for certain fundamental traits of character. Because they are not born with this knowledge, children need to learn what these traits are. As I have said, children will learn them most profoundly by being in the presence of adults who exemplify them. But we can help the grasp and the appreciation of the desirability of these traits through the curriculum. That is, we can invite our students' to discern the moral of stories and the moral or morals of events and lives.

Let me mention just a few examples. There are thousands.

Do we want our children to know what honesty means? Then we might teach them about Abe Lincoln walking three miles to return six cents, and, conversely, about Aesop's shepherd boy who cried wolf.

Do we want our children to know what courage means? Then we might teach them about Joan of Arc, Horatius at the bridge, Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad.

Do we want them to know about kindness and compassion, and their opposites? Then they should read A Christmas Carol and The Diary of Anne Frank and, later on, King Lear.

Do we want them to know about loyalty to country? Then we should want them to know of Nathan Hale, and to know about the

Battle of Britain and the pass at Thermopylae. They should know that men such as Lt. Elmo Zumwalt have served their country willingly, nobly. And they should understand the contrary examples of men like Benedict Arnold and John Walker.

We want our children to know what faithfulness to family and friends means, and so they should know how Penelope and Telemachus and even an old dog waited twenty years for Odysseus to come home. We want them to know about respect for the law, so they should understand why Socrates told Crito: No, I must submit to the decree of Athens.

We want them to know about persistence in the face of adversity, and so they should know about the Donner Party, and Columbus, and George Washington during the Revolution, and Lincoln during the Civil War. And our youngest should be told about the Little Engine that Could.

We want our children to recognize greed, and so they should know King Midas. We want them to recognize vanity, and so they should read "Ozymandias" and learn about Achilles. We want them to know about over-reaching ambition, and so they should read about Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

We want our children to know that hard work pays off, so we should teach them about the Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk and Booker T. Washington learning to read. We want them to see the dangers of an unreasoning conformity, so we should tell them about the Emperor's New Clothes and about Galileo. We want them to see that one individual's action can make all the difference, so we should

tell them about Rosa Parks, and about one man's discovery of a vaccine against polio.

We want our children to respect the rights of others, and so they should read the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, and "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

And there are some other stories we can include, too -- stories from the Bible: Ruth's loyalty to Naomi, Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers, Jonathan's friendship with David, the Good Samaritan's kindness toward a stranger, Cain's treatment of his brother Abel, David's cleverness and courage in facing Goliath. These are great stories, and we should be able to use them in teaching character to our children. Why? Because they teach moral values we all share. And they shouldn't be thrown out just because they are in the Bible. As Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles recently asked, "Are students really better off with the theories of psychologists than with the hard thoughts of Jeremiah and Jesus?" Knowing these hard thoughts is surely part of moral literacy and it does not violate our Constitution.

These, then, are some of the familiar accounts of virtue and vice with which our children should be familiar. Do our children know these stories, these works? Unfortunately, in many places, they do not. They do not because in some places we are no longer teaching them. Why should we go to the trouble of picking up the task again? Well, for several reasons.

First, because these stories and others like them are interesting to children. Of course the pedagogy will need to be

varied for different students with different abilities, but you can't beat these stories when it comes to engaging the attention of a child. For getting children's attention, nothing in recent years, on TV or anywhere else, has improved on a good story that begins: "Once upon a time."

Second, we should be teaching these stories because, unlike courses in "moral reasoning," they give children some specific, common reference points. Our literature and history are a rich quarry of moral literacy. We should mine that quarry. Children must have at their disposal a stock of examples illustrating what we believe to be right and wrong, and good and bad -- examples illustrating that, in many instances, what is morally right and wrong can indeed be known. We offer them the knowledge of these stories as reliable moral reference points.

The third reason we should teach these stories and works is that they can help anchor our children in their culture, its history and its traditions. They give children a mooring. This is necessary, because individual morality, of course, is inextricably bound to the conscience and the memory of society. Our traditions are a source of knowing the ideals by which we wish to live our lives. We should teach these accounts of character to our children so that we may welcome them to a common world, and in that common world to the continuing and common task of preserving the principles, the ideals, and the notions of greatness we hold dear.

Now you will notice that in all my talk of moral literacy, I have not mentioned issues like nuclear war, abortion, creationism,

or euthanasia. This may come as a disappointment to some people, but the fact is that the formation of character in young people is educationally a different task from, and a prior task to, the discussion of the great, difficult, controversial disputes of the day. First things first. We should "teach values" the same way we teach other things: one step at a time. We should not use the fact that there are indeed many difficult and controversial moral questions as an argument against the basic instruction in the enterprise. We do not argue against teaching physics because laser physics is difficult, against teaching biology or chemistry because gene splicing and cloning are complex and controversial, against teaching American history because there are heated disputes about the Founders' intent. Every field has its complexities and controversies. And every field has its basics.

So too with forming character and achieving moral literacy, or teaching values, if you will. You have to walk before you can run, and you ought to be able to run straight before you are asked to run an obstacle course or a mine field. So the moral basics should be taught in school, first. The tough issues can, if teachers and parents wish, be taken up later. And, I would add, a person who is morally literate will be immeasurably better equipped than a morally illiterate person to reach a reasoned and ethically defensible position on these tough issues. But the formation of character and the teaching of moral literacy comes first, the tough issues second, later, in senior year, or after.

Further, the task of teaching moral literacy and forming

character is not political in the usual meaning of the term. People of good character are not all going to come out on the same side of disputes over difficult political and social issues. Good people -- people of character and moral literacy -- can be conservative, and good people can be liberal; good people can be religious, and good people can be non-religious. But we must not permit our disputes over political and theological matters to suffocate the obligation we have to offer instruction to our young people in the area in which we have, as a society, reached a consensus: namely, on the importance of good character, and on some of its pervasive particulars on which we agree.

Now I have spent much time as Secretary of Education travelling this country, visiting schools, teaching classes. I have taught American schoolchildren in the 7th grade the Declaration of Independence, and 11th graders Federalist 10 and the story of the Constitutional Convention. To 3rd graders I've taught the story of Cincinnatus returning to his farm when he could have had an empire. And they got it. To the 3rd graders too, I've taught how nothing but George Washington's exemplary character stood between the Continental Congress in Philadelphia and a mutinous army of unpaid soldiers, and how that shining character itself was enough to make those men turn back.

I have taught these lessons, and others, to American children. I have tried to teach them directly and unapologetically. I have talked to teachers and parents about these matters as well. And when I have very publicly done this in our

classrooms, no one, ladies and gentlemen, no one has ever stood up and said, "You shouldn't be teaching these lessons. You are indoctrinating them, corrupting them, you are not respecting parental prerogative. This isn't the right stuff for our children to learn." On the contrary. People have been pleased. Nor is it the case that I have any special abilities, or gimmicks, which enable me to do something other teachers could not do. On the contrary. But it has been my experience, in many trips across this country, that students and parents are pleased by such discussions; they want more, and most teachers and principals are not opposed to giving them more. I submit that there is a very broad, and very deep, consensus out there, and that we are failing in our duty if we ignore it. Objections noted, cautions observed, let us get down to, and back to, the business of the moral education of the young.